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UNCLAS ROME 001263

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL CALL ON MAYOR OF ROME

1. (SBU) Summary. In his farewell call on Walter Veltroni, Mayor of Rome, the Ambassador lauded the city's handling of the Pope's funeral and its support for the Embassy over the years. On the political front, Veltroni, a member of the Democrats of the Left (DS) and potential center-left candidate for Prime Minister, was doubtful that the center-right would win in the upcoming national elections. End summary.

2. (SBU) The Ambassador began his April 13 call on the Mayor by complimenting Veltroni for Rome's successful management of last week's funeral for Pope John Paul II, and thanked him especially for Rome's support for the US delegation, which included the President and Mrs. Bush, two former presidents, Secretary Rice and NSA Hadley, and 40 members of Congress.

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Veltroni estimated that three million people -- and 1,700 VIPs -- visited Rome to pay their last respects. Fortunately, he said, the city of Rome already had a plan prepared, as it does for many contingencies. Five to six thousand police and 20,000 municipal officers helped keep the city secure and clean. There were no major incidents of theft, illness, or accidents, and all the major piazzas were clean within two hours of the conclusion of the funeral. In addition to providing two million bottles of water (and 3,500 portable toilets), Veltroni cited the "psychological factor" of having plenty of city volunteers and sanitary officials on site as an important factor in maintaining order. He anticipated much smaller crowds (hundreds of thousands, "like having dinner at home") for the inauguration of the new pope. Veltroni said he met with New York Mayor Bloomberg and former President Clinton during their visits.

3. (SBU) The Ambassador also thanked Veltroni for his support in the Embassy's acquisition of the new "Sembler" building, as well as security improvements to the Embassy as a whole. Veltroni assured the Ambassador that the Embassy would continue to receive excellent support from the city of Rome.

4. (SBU) Turning to politics, Veltroni called this a "dark moment" for the Berlusconi government, which lost 11 out of 13 regions in the April 3-4 elections (septel). (Comment. Veltroni is a potential challenger to Romano Prodi as center-left candidate for Prime Minister, although this is less likely after the left's good showing in the elections. PM Berlusconi has commented to us on several occasions that, while he has nothing to fear from Prodi as an opponent, Veltroni would present a challenge. End comment.) Veltroni noted that it is the first time in ten years that the center-left received, in absolute terms, more votes than the center-right. The situation could be much different in a year, he said, but Italy's severe economic and budget situations, combined with a "leadership crisis" in the center-right, mean things will probably get worse for the center-right. He doubted, however, that Berlusconi would call for new elections before June, since that would mean dissolving Parliament by next week. He also did not believe they would occur next fall, since the budget bill would not yet be passed, which Berlusconi needed to do to meet the three percent budget deficit called for under the EU stability pact to avoid facing EU penalties.

5. (SBU) Veltroni agreed with the Ambassador that Italy had been especially hard hit by the conversion from the Lira to the Euro due to a lack of price controls, though the city of Rome negotiated an agreement with local retailers that helped control inflation in Rome. Veltroni opined that the French referendum on the EU constitution will be a decisive moment for the EU; if the French vote no, he said, it will be a "disaster" for Europe. (Note: Veltroni hosted last October's ceremonial signing of the EU constitution by EU leaders in Rome's City Hall. End note.)

6. (SBU) Veltroni will travel to New York next week where he will meet with Senators Kennedy and Clinton, former Mayor Giuliani, NBA Commissioner David Stern, and Wall Street representatives, and give a speech at Columbia University.

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